METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCHES IN CANADA
THE BEGINNINGS

by Reverend Bob Wolfe
(revised by Reverend Colleen Darraugh)

At the end of May 1973, I had returned to my pulpit at MCC Sacramento from a special assignment in connection with the disaffiliation of the Denver church. I was busy picking up the threads of my ministry in that city when I received a phone call from the Moderator, the Reverend Troy D. Perry, asking me to consider going to Toronto, Ontario, in response to a letter and a subsequent petition received by the Reverend Lee Carlton, the chair of Church Extension and World Missions.

With a check for one hundred dollars and a one-way plane ticket, I left Sacramento soon after and arrived at the Toronto airport late on Wednesday evening. I was processed into the country by Immigration Canada on a temporary one-year document as a clergy person. After the formalities, I was met by Eldred MacMillan and Mel Knight, two of the signers of the petition sent to the Fellowship. Mel told me that, despite what might have been said in the petition, the two of them were the church.

There was a meeting later that evening in the office the group had rented in downtown Toronto. During that meeting I found that the majority of the signers were primarily interested in the social services a new gay organization might bring rather than in a 'religious' church. Subsequent meetings over the next few days confirmed this information and further led to the knowledge that the primary purpose of reaching out to the Fellowship was to establish in Canada a separate organization for those who were opposed to the leadership of George Hislop, president of the Community Homophile Association of Toronto (CHAT), and to do so with an anticipated full funding by the Fellowship. (George subsequently became a good friend of the church as well as of the pastor. He was recognized by the Fellowship at its 1983 General Conference held in Toronto for his tireless, pioneering efforts in establishing the homophile movement in Canada.)

Handbills were made up and distributed to the local gay establishments, which by comparison to U.S. cities were very large although very few in number. We held the first worship service in the office the next Sunday evening. Attendance was low, but there had been little time for word to get around. On the second Sunday, attendance was again low; however, there was one newcomer who was to become a strong spiritual asset to the pastor and to future growth of the Church, the Reverend Philip Speranza, then an Orthodox presbyter. reverend Speranza had had previous lay experience with MCC in Chicago and was at the same time pastoring an Orthodox congregation in Toronto. It was not to be long before he took the necessary steps to have his ordination recognized by the Fellowship.

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MCC was controversial in Canada. For many Canadians, identifiable affiliation with church was largely a matter of family tradition. Church attendance in major metropolitan communities was not large. One could be Anglican and go for years without attending, and still feel quite comfortable identifying oneself as an Anglican. The same went for members of the United Church of Canada, a fifty or so year old union of Methodists, Presbyterians, and others. There were a few other groups, Baptists, Assemblies, and independents, and some of them were fairly well attended. However, in 1973, Canadians seemed to want to know what our affiliation was, what were we. The idea of a new church coming along just did not seem to fit Canadians' traditional understanding of church.

CHAT provided opportunity to speak before one of their informational meetings; however, their interest, understandably, focused on the issue of the possibility that the church was coming to town as a competitive threat to CHAT's preeminence not only in Toronto, but in the whole of Canada. The only comment coming anywhere close to dealing with the issue of who we were was an impassioned speech by a CHAT member demanding to know why I was attempting to import southern U.S. fundamentalism into Canada. The meeting was not successful in introducing the church to Torontonians or in dealing with the inherited rift between CHAT and those perceived to be the sponsors of the church.

The other two gay groups, The Gay Alliance Toward Equality (GATE) and the Body Politic Collective, were both highly radicalized and saw the church in Marxist terms. They were not accessible to us.

In attempting to find a location for worship other than the office, we met the Reverend Jim Fisk, rector of the Church of the Holy Trinity (Anglican). Reverend Fisk not only welcomed communication, but also offered use of his church's facilities as long as we paid for rent whatever we felt we could afford. As long as we were with Holy Trinity, their policy remained the same. Our church Board of Directors did regularly increase the payment as our offerings increased.

The idea of moving to Trinity was not popular. It was an old church. A beautiful, mid-nineteenth century building, but more importantly, a church of long established liberal traditions. Whatever was going on in Toronto that was new and exciting and perhaps uncomfortable to the establishment, you could count on finding the Church of the Holy Trinity. It had, in fact, provided meeting space in the first days of CHAT's existence. Many in the community, including some of our early members, were put off by such an unpredictable, non-establishment organization and some even felt that our church, made up of gays and lesbians, would be besmirched by such an affiliation. Somehow they were expecting the church to be a place to hide and be safe from the world. Fortunately, a good number listened as the gospel was presented in ways to show that Jesus and Paul defied those who called for the 'safe' way.

When we moved to Trinity, we were still quite small and although for the first Sunday evening we used the main altar to celebrate, we regularly used a small upstairs chapel so that we wouldn't get lost. By then, we had begun to put out a small monthly newsletter with the financial support of the local gay businesses, the bars and the baths. This, of course, led to more controversy within the congregation; but it also led to continued growth and it was not long before we were able to move downstairs at Trinity. The newsletter, with close to half its space given over to ads just to be self-supporting, attempted to be the local community's newspaper, presenting news of what was going on in the community that was of interest to gays or might have an impact on their lives. But also the paper attempted to present serious discussions on the nature and the role of the church and discussions on some of the very serious issues confronting gay lives. The combination seemed to work; growth was steady, albeit slow.

A young man wrote to the church in those very early days; it was a troubled letter, reflecting a soul in torment over his need to be true to himself and his need to be true to God. He soon moved to Toronto and became part of our growing congregation. This was David Gunton, who later became the church's first exhorter and the first Canadian to be licensed clergy in UFMCC. (In those days, the term 'exhorter' was the title of those who were recognized by the pastor and the board of directors as being in preparation for licensed ministry in the fellowship. During the early days of MCC Toronto, the title became widely recognized and well respected in the community because of the work and the dedication of the give who held it.) Another, Lloyd Greenway, who entered the exhorter program, was licensed and went on to do the founding work at the church in Calgary.

There were others in the early days of the church who felt the call to be active partners in God's work through MCC. Joanne Monti, a member of the choir and a soloist of incomparable talent, was one of a growing number of women who were starting to come to the church and take active roles in its life and leadership. Joanne entered the group preparing for ministry and went on to become the first Canadian woman to be an MCC minister. She to a difficult assignment in Montreal where an early effort had turned into a nonaffiliated church. Montreal, in keeping with the traditions of that culturally troubled province, tended toward male exclusivity and Roman Catholicism.

Another young man came from Halifax to learn more about MCC. He knew he was called to ministry. He went home to resign from his teaching career and returned to join the church and become part of the exhorter or student clergy program. That, of course, was Brent Hawkes, pastor of MCC Toronto, who continues to lead that congregation to greater levels of growth.

The fifth member of the exhorter team, Larry Gauer, came to the church from Oshawa, Ontario, where he was a supervising teacher with the Durham County Board of Education. He was the first of the newly licensed Canadians to leave the home church

to extend the mission of MCC to other parts of the country. Larry was cofounder of MCC-Vancouver in British Columbia.

Somewhere in those days Guy Giroux showed up. Guy served many, many years as a deacon. He was French-Canadian and so began the outreach to that important part of Canadian society. He was also an active member of Spearhead, a leather organization, and provided the opening bridge to that group which was to be a long time organizational friend to the new and growing church.

Less than six months after the first services of the church, near tragedy led to opportunity for new growth. Early in January 1974, there was a phone call for me from the police department. A man was on the roof of the 34 story city hall threatening to hump. He had given them my name. Would I come? With the help of an officer from the fire department, we were able to get this young man off the roof.

A week later, I received a phone call from City Hall. Mayor David Crombie, whom I had met only four days prior to the incident at a special celebration at Holy Trinity, would present me with a commendation at the City Council meeting two weeks hence. After consulting with friends, I decided that this would be a magnificent opportunity to get the church's name and mission to a wider audience. We had thought of placing an ad for the church in the Toronto Star, but had been told they would not accept gay advertising. I submitted classified ad copy to them. They called to refuse to accept it. I requested that the refusal be in writing. They agreed. Their letter arrived at the church office the morning of the day I was to appear before City Council to receive the award. Needless to say, I mentioned the newspaper's refusal in my acceptance remarks. The resulting newspaper articles and television interviews were all highly successful in bringing the church's message to the broad community and led to further significant growth. As well as the growth in congregation, there was a tremendous increase in the requests from other clergy and lawyers for information about the church and its understanding of traditional attitudes toward homosexuality.

As time moved on, Holy Trinity sold off portions of its very costly downtown property for construction of a major galleria type shopping mall. As it became evident that this space was going to be demolished, we began to face the question of where we might be able to continue the counseling and outreach activities. The Board of Directors showed great insight and commitment when they authorized the leasing of a three-story row house close to the existing intown bars and close to the hustling and cruising areas. The response of the congregation for support of the new Community Services Center and for participation in the staffing and management of MCC House was thrilling. The number of people coming to the Services Center was staggering.

The church in Ontario had been incorporated in the first six months of existence and had been registered with the Ministry of Revenue and Taxation in Ottawa. In order to be recognized for purposes of tax exemption, as well as for tax deductibility for our contributors, the church was not able to remit the tithe to the Fellowship. In addition,

the church was holding on its books an amount for a district tithe and an additional five percent self-imposed tithe for church extension in Canada. With the extension underway to Ottawa and a formal study group established in Montreal, we prepared for recognition as the Canadian District by the Fellowship and also by the Canadian government as Metropolitan Community Churches in Canada, a federally incorporated religious organization. The national incorporation was able to function anywhere in Canada, while the previous incorporation within the province of Ontario would have had serious limitations. While the Canadian church is now organized as two districts, the single national corporation remains as the united structure within the nation.[1]

As preparations were completed, was seen that while the accounting for the Fellowship and District monies was correct, a full transfer to the new body of all funds due to its safekeeping was not feasible. When the congregation was apprised of this situation and the effect on church extension, its response to a request for offerings of one thousand dollars per week over the following four week was to contribute in excess of ten thousand dollars over a six week period. This outpouring of faith and support was seen as a mandate to extend the work across Canada. As a result, the pastor resigned the pulpit and moved to the west coast along with the newly licensed Reverend Gauer to found MCC-Vancouver. They were shortly followed by Reverend Greenway and Reverend Gunton who went to the Province of Alberta to found new works at Calgary and Edmonton, respectively.

With Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, and Winnipeg firmly established, the Canadian District was divided into the Eastern Canadian District and the Western Canadian District. It is interesting to note that the Toronto church was the only chartered church in the Eastern Canadian District at the time. MCC Toronto, in the nineties, is among the Fellowship's largest churches. This is especially noteworthy since it is not located in the Bible Belt! Reverend Brent Hawkes continues to pastor this church.

New churches continue to be established in both Canadian districts. In the latter half of the 1980's changes were made that permitted the forwarding of the 10% fellowship tithe to the UFMCC head office in the U.S. The two districts continue to work together on national political issues and MCC clergy pension in Canada.

After a number of tries by different people, the ministry in French Canada continues to be a challenge. French Canada has its own culture and language. Often lines are drawn between Anglophone and Francophone, Catholic and Protestant. Throughout the 1980's, particularly under the leadership of Reverend Ron Bergeron (deceased), the Ottawa congregation made significant contributions of translating UFMCC literature, By-laws, hymns, and the then required credentialing materials, and exams

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[1]In 1996, the Western Canadian District merged with the Mid-Central District to form the Mountains and Plains District. There is, therefore, a single Canadian District, but a united structure.

into French. The frequency of changes to our By-laws and C.C.C.C. process has made it difficult to keep current materials available in French.

Ecumenically, MCC in Canada continued to build bridges of friendship and support with other denominations. MCC'ers were called upon during the 1980's by the United Church of Canada and the Presbyterian Church during each of their studies on the ordination of self-declared homosexuals. Relationships were build with seminaries across the country as open MCC'ers prepared for ministry and active alumni transferred credentials. MCC theological students participated in the Canadian Theological Students Association (CTSA). As a student, Reverend Colleen Darraugh served on the Executive of the CTSA. Reverend Darraugh also served as a co-facilitator of the Theological Students' Conference at the 6th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, in Vancouver 1983. Throughout the 80's, MCC nurtured relationships with the Ecumenical Forum of Canada and the Canadian Council of Churches.

So ends this very brief recitation on the beginnings of the Metropolitan Community Church in Canada. In the 1990's, MCC continues to be actively involved in the support and establishment of many AIDS organizations. MCC'ers have also been active in local, provincial, and federal politics, successfully working for the inclusion of sexual orientation in human rights codes.